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ABSTRACT

This article explores the question of whether language teachers are capable of ascertaining student acquisition of grammatical rules when the lesson is taught orally. Oral fluency is seen as the foundation of the language process, and a distinction is made between productive and reproductive speech. Frequent use of examples illustrates linguistic problems encountered in the structuring of instructional material. (RL)

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# The implications of the oral approach to modern language teaching

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Editor's note: It is often said that a teacher who is using oral methods has no check on whether his pupils have grasped the language structures that he has been teaching unless grammatical rules are explicitly formulated and the pupils tested in them. The following article gives the views of a modern language teacher on this.

The first point to make is that oral work is the *approach* to language learning. The method of teaching is something which exists in its own right and is applied equally to the spoken and written forms of the language. Thus oral fluency is not one of several alternative objectives which may be chosen at will but is the very foundation of the language learning process.

In the alphabetical systems of Europe the written or printed symbols are two stages removed from their meaning. They represent speech sounds which in turn stand for objects, relationships, concepts. Command of the spoken word, then, is the basic skill which will enable our pupils to cope adequately with the processes of reading and writing. Ultimately the pupil should be able to communicate in writing anything he can say, although obviously at any given stage of the learning process he may be able to say something which he has not yet learnt to write.

Genuine mastery of a foreign language is demonstrated when, both in the perception and understanding of someone else's speech (*i.e.* in listening and reading) and in the expression of one's own thoughts (*i.e.* in speaking and writing), our consciousness

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is concentrated primarily on the semantic aspects of language – that is on the thoughts which are expressed by means of speech – and the linguistic medium itself is not subjected to conscious analysis and control.

From this there follows a clear deduction as to the teaching method. If a teacher's aim is to enable his pupils to speak, read and write in the foreign language, to use it as a means of communication, he must train them, not in the construction of sentences based on an analysis of the main grammatical and syntactical differences between it and the mother tongue, but in the functional use of the foreign language in a natural context.

The pupil must hear, repeat and use the phrases of a simple dialogue between teacher and pupil, until these have been mastered to the point of automatic response to the dialogue situation. This is a highly skilled process which calls for great ingenuity on the part of the teacher in presenting his material, at first with little or no change, but later with considerable variation, in order to develop to the full the skill of the pupil in manipulating the basic speech patterns, until he can handle quite large units of speech and thought. This process depends on one of the main features of linguistic behaviour, namely analogy, which is without doubt the most powerful factor in language learning. Analogy plays a decisive part with children who learn by comparison and substitution. But in the classroom we have not at our disposal the unlimited time in which the child in the mother tongue situation can try out the language and discover by dint of trial and error which substitutions work and which are not understood within the circle of family and friends. Hence the need to facilitate learning by systematic and intensive analogical presentation. Teaching must be directed to forcing the pupil to make the necessary analogies.

At this point we must distinguish between reproductive and productive speech. Reproductive speech is any utterance on the part of the pupil which has previously been apprehended and which is reproduced at a given moment without significant

alteration. When, for example, a pupil recites part of a foreign text which he has learnt by heart, or when in a 'conversation' with his teacher or another pupil he uses only such questions and answers as he has retained in his memory, then his speech, though active, is by no means productive but only reproductive. This is a necessary stage in the process of learning a foreign language, and the teacher's early questioning will be directed to repetition of this kind, in order to establish the particular speech pattern to be learnt.

On the other hand, a pupil's speech can be called productive only when he freely and creatively adapts the lexical and grammatical resources of the foreign language to an entirely new linguistic situation. He is, in fact, creating new formulations which he has not previously encountered in his experience. He has perceived the significance of a particular facet of the language and has made the necessary analogy. This is the final test of the pupil's penetration of the foreign language.[1]

To achieve this end each phrase or structure must be placed in its functional context. The teacher controls the presentation of new material. He must choose his context so that the function of a particular language pattern or grammatical construction can be clearly understood.

This is vital in any foreign language teaching, since there are so many more forms to be related to their respective functions than in English.

In such a presentation three important conditions must be met.

1 The linguistic context which the teacher devises must have implicit in it the particular structure he wishes to introduce. For example the statement about a picture or a blackboard drawing:

*Voici un homme. Il tient une pipe à la main*

identifies *pipe* as a feminine word and paves the way for a question which makes use of the pronoun in its correct functional

[1]These points are also made in the Introduction to C. V. Russell and P. L. Willig *German Tests without Translation* (1965): where the techniques outlined in this article are applied to the more advanced stages of language learning.

context, namely as a substitute for a noun just previously mentioned.

Q 1 *Est-ce qu'il la tient à la main gauche ou à la main droite?*

A 1 *Il la tient à la main droite.*

Q 2 (pointing to the cigarette in the woman's mouth) *Qu'est-ce que c'est?*

A 2 *C'est une cigarette.*

Q 3 *Est-ce que la femme la tient à la main ou est-ce qu'elle la fume?*

A 3 *Elle la fume.*

Q 4 *Est-ce que l'homme fume la pipe?*

A 4 *Non, il la tient à la main.*

Q 5 *Qu'est-ce que la femme fait avec la cigarette?*

A 5 *Elle la fume.*

The point is that the pupil is being shown not only *what* he must say but also *when* he is to say it. There is, thus, a close relationship between the form and its function. At this stage the pattern is being fed to the pupil who will reproduce it virtually unchanged. This is reproductive speech within the terms defined above. There must, of course, be greater use on the part of the teacher of the pattern to be taught than I have indicated. The pupil cannot repeat the new pattern accurately until he has heard it a sufficient number of times.

2 In the next phase the pupil must be placed in the position of having to choose the correct answer from several alternatives. Among these alternatives there will be answers which do not include the new pattern. The pupil must thus demonstrate not only that he knows when to use the structure being taught, but also that he knows when *not* to use it, which is a more searching test of his comprehension. He will not be parroting back the pattern given by the teacher, but will be giving the facts of the situation and, at the same time, discriminating between one mode of speech and another.

Q 1 *Qu'est-ce que l'homme tient à la main?*

A 1 *Il tient une pipe.*

Q 2 *Est-ce qu'il la tient à la main gauche?*

A 2 *Non, il la tient à la main droite.*

Q 3 *Est-ce que la femme fume une pipe?*
A 3 *Non, elle fume une cigarette.*
Q 4 *Est-ce que l'homme fume la pipe?*
A 4 *Non, il la tient à la main.*
Q 5 *Qui fume la cigarette?*
A 5 *La femme la fume.*

If, at a later stage, the indirect object pronoun is being taught the number of variants is greatly increased. Questions must be devised to which the following basic patterns are the answer.

*Il donne une blouse à sa soeur.*
*Il la donne à sa soeur.*
*Il lui donne une blouse.*
*Henri la lui donne.*

These are quoted merely as examples of the basic patterns to be achieved. Obviously they are not to be practised as an empty drill in relation to Henri and his sister, but in a composite situation concerning the daily happenings of a particular family. Thus, details of who fetches or brings the milk, the bread and the letters provide the background of facts upon which a most exacting sequence of questions can be built. This is far removed from the substitution exercise of the traditional kind.

Q 1 *Est-ce que Madame Lebrun va chercher le pain tous les matins ou est-ce que le boulanger le lui apporte?*
A 1 *Elle va le chercher.*
Q 2 *Est-ce qu'elle va chercher le lait aussi?*
A 2 *Non, le laitier le lui apporte.*
Q 3 *Qu'est-ce que le facteur lui apporte?*
A 3 *Il lui apporte des lettres.*
Q 4 *A qui est-ce que Madame Lebrun donne la soucoupe de lait?*
A 4 *Elle la donne au chat.*
Q 5 *Et qu'est-ce qu'elle donne à Monsieur Lebrun?*
A 5 *Elle lui donne une tasse de café.*

Whilst these questions are part of the learning situation, they are also testing whether the pupil has understood the significance of what he is doing. If, in reply to question 3 in the above sequence, a pupil merely echoes the words of his immediate

predecessor and says, '*Il les lui apporte*', then it is immediately apparent that he has not understood. If, on the other hand, all your pupils respond correctly, then they are moving towards the productive use of language.

3 The final stage comes when the pupil has used meaningfully sufficient examples of the basic structure. He must now be made to use the pattern in a completely new situation. In other words the teacher must force him to make an analogy. For example, in learning the direct object pronoun we used a picture of a man holding a pipe in his right hand and a woman smoking a cigarette. The analogy could be forced with a picture of a boy eating an ice cream.

Q 1 *Voici un garçon. Et ça, qu'est-ce que c'est?*

A 1 *C'est une glace.*

Q 2 *Qu'est-ce que le garçon fait avec la glace?*

A 2 *Il la mange.*

In giving the last reply the pupil has created a new formulation which he has not previously encountered in his experience. In any teaching situation we depend on what has previously been taught. In this case we assume that the pupil already knows the meaning of *manger* and *une glace*. He himself has provided the essential piece of information which is the link with the correct form of the direct object pronoun; namely that *glace* is feminine. At some time in the past he has undoubtedly used the structure *Il mange une glace* but this is the first time that he has produced from within himself *il la mange* and has moved outside the confines of the prototype patterns of *Elle la fume* and *Il la tient à la main*. The teacher will take good care to ask the testing or analogy-making question not of the brightest but of one of the weaker pupils. If a number of pupils fail consecutively to give the right answer, then the presentation has been faulty or the teacher has moved over the ground too quickly. The potentialities of the new situation created by *Le garçon mange une glace* must be exploited as further teaching material and the final analogy forced with a fourth example; say, *La jeune fille porte une serviette*.

An essential element in all this is the correct structuring of the learning material. How this is done is beyond the scope of the present article. Each problem has to be worked out separately, but in general terms everything depends on what the pupil has himself used with understanding in the language learning process.

The illustrations used in this article are, so to speak, the skeleton of the question sequences demanded by this method of modern language teaching. In practice the questions will have more flesh and be more varied, since they will range over a larger area of the pupils' foreign language experience, but they must always be submitted to this rigorous and disciplined use, if the teacher is to be certain, at all times, that his pupils are with him. Language drill will not be effective if the learner is presented frontally with ill-assorted specimens of the language in a routine that exhibits no characteristics other than sheer number and inexorable recurrence.

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